

METHOD OF MONITORING OPERATION OF AN AUTOMATED TOOL AND ASSOCIATED APPARATUS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to an improved method and associated apparatus for facilitating monitoring of an automated tool for one or more operational characteristics in order to detect undesired interference with the operation of the same and, more specifically, it relates to such method and apparatus which employs a
10 wireless sensor such as a microelectromechanical systems device (MEMS) structured to transmit sensor information in space.

2. Description of the Prior Art

It has been known to employ various sorts of sensors in connection with the
15 monitoring of conditions of operating equipment including industrial equipment employed to perform manufacturing functions on workpieces. In such systems the information from sensors is frequently delivered to a controller unit which may employ the sensor data to determine whether an output signal effecting a change in control of the equipment should be generated. See, generally, U.S. patent 6,101,857,
20 the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

It has been known to employ microelectromechanical systems devices and associated sensors to detect the various properties such as, for example, vehicle tire pressure. It has also been known to employ sensors which react to acceleration limits employing an inertial response, the calibrated mass and the elastic response of at least
25 part of the sensor geometry. The deflection of the elastic response may be coupled with hardware that utilizes another property to communicate a condition that can be acted upon by the system control.

It has also been known to transmit data and energy between a base station and a remote station employing RF energy or other sources of energy in the transmission.
30 See U.S. patents 6,289,237 and 6,615,074.

In spite of the foregoing teachings, there remains a meaningful need for an improved method of monitoring automated tools for undesired changes in operating properties of the system in order to facilitate prompt corrective action.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention provides a method of operating an automated tool which includes positioning a wireless sensor such as a microelectromechanical system device having at least one sensor in close proximity to the automated tool, monitoring one or more conditions of the automated tool and emitting signals containing sensor information in space to a processor which processes the sensor information and, in the
10 event it determines that the automated tool has departed from desired conditions of operation, issues a responsive signal.

 The automated system may, for example, be a manufacturing apparatus working on the fabrication of a workpiece. It may be a progressive stamping die operating on a metal sheet workpiece.

15 The system, preferably, is wireless and, thereby, permits positioning of the sensor or sensors in close proximity to the region of the automated tool being monitored without requiring wires either as a source of power for the sensors such as a microelectromechanical system device or for communication.

 Corresponding apparatus is provided.

20 It is an object of the present invention to provide a method of efficiently monitoring operation of an automated tool in a wireless manner so as to facilitate close positioning of sensors to the portion of the automated tool being monitored.

 It is another object of the present invention to provide a method of employing microelectromechanical systems devices and other types of sensors in monitoring one
25 or more operating conditions of an automated tool to effect early detection of interference.

 It is another object of the present invention to monitor motion and force related conditions of the operating automated tool.

 It is yet another object of the present invention to effect efficient and timely
30 monitoring so as to resist undesired cost of repair and downtime for the system.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide such a method and related apparatus to enhance the efficiency of performance of automated tools.

These and other objects of the invention will be more fully understood from the following detailed description of the invention on reference to the illustrations
5 appended hereto.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram of a form of method of the present invention.

Figure 2 is a schematic illustration of a form of apparatus employable in the present invention.

10 Figure 3 is a partially schematic illustration of an automated tool employable in the progressive performance of operations on a workpiece.

Figure 4 is an exploded schematic view of a form of progressive die design showing dies usable in the press of Figure 3.

Figure 5 illustrates a segment of the die and workpiece feed employed with a
15 sensor of the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

As employed herein, the term "automated tool" means a piece of equipment having one or more moving parts structured to engage in repetitive cycles of motion and shall expressly include, but not be limited to industrial manufacturing apparatus
20 which has components that move relative to one another including, but not limited to, apparatus performing operations on a workpiece and equipment having components that can break, deform or wear.

As employed herein, the term "wireless" means that a device of the invention employable in a method of the invention may function efficiently without requiring a
25 hard wired connection for delivering information obtained by a sensor to the processor and without requiring a wire to deliver power to energize the device.

As employed herein, a reference to transmission "in space" means that signals are being transmitted through air or similar medium regardless of whether the transmission is within or partially within an enclosure, as contrasted with transmission
30 by a hard wired route.

Referring now to Figure 1 wherein a method of the invention employed with an automated tool performing a function on a workpiece will be considered. The workpiece feed 2 introduces the workpiece which may, for example, be metal sheet into the automated tool which in the form shown is indicated as being a progressive
5 press 4. Progressive press 4 is controlled by press control 6. While other types of sensors may be employed, the preferred form of sensor employed in the present invention is a microelectromechanical system (MEMS) device having one or more sensors. The microelectromechanical system sensor(s) 10 is employed to detect one or more properties of the automatic tool and emits sensor information through
10 wireless transmission 12. The information is preferably processed and data recorded continuously 14 with a determination 16 being made as to whether the sensor data is within the predetermined limits. If the answer is "yes", no action 18 is taken. If the answer is "no", one or more of several alternate actions may be taken. A responsive signal may be emitted to (a) shut down the press 20 through a signal 26, 30 to the
15 press control 6 or (b) to deliver data 22 or (c) to sound an alarm 24 or (d) to deliver signal 30 to the press control 6 in order to initiate corrective action other than shutting down of the press or any desired combinations of responsive signals may be employed.

Referring now to Figure 2, there is shown automated tool 40 controlled by
20 controller 42 with a microelectromechanical device sensor 44 monitoring one or more conditions and providing sensor information 46 through space to a microprocessor 50, preferably as digital information and employing an RF carrier. The microprocessor 50 effects a comparison between the sensor information transmitted in signal 46 with the stored desired parameters in order to make the comparison 16 referred to in Figure
25 1. The result may be to deliver this information by signal 52 to controller 42 or to shut down the automated tool 40 through unit 54 and signal 56 or to deliver data which may be presented in any desired form as in hard copy form or by computer monitor with or without intervening storage or enhancement 58 or to sound an alarm 60.

In the alternative, if desired, the sensor device 44 may be so created as by a smart microchip so as to emit signals 46 only when there has been a departure from the desired characteristics.

5 In general, the microelectromechanical system device and sensors may be energized by a battery operatively associated therewith or may be remotely provided with energy through an onboard capacitor which is remotely charged or by energization such as disclosed in U.S. patent 6,289,237 or 6,615,074.

Referring now to Figure 3, there is shown an automated tool in the form of a progressive stamping press for sequentially creating fabricated or semifabricated
10 articles such as, for example, rotors or stators, by means of a punch press 70 and an associated progressive die set 72. In the form illustrated, the workpiece which is metal strip 76 travels into the press 70 and through the press 70 in the direction indicated by arrow A. A roll feed 78 serving to intermittently advance the workpiece through the die sets 72 in coordination with press operation. A
15 microelectromechanical system device having an appropriate sensor or sensors of the present invention may be positioned at point 80, for example, in order to monitor for various conditions such as improper web feed. It will be appreciated that, in view of the wireless nature of the present microelectromechanical system device and its associated sensor or sensors, the device may be positioned in close proximity to the
20 condition being monitored.

Referring to Figure 4, there is shown an example of a progressive die set usable in the press 70 shown in Figure 3. The punch and die are subjected to relative movement through generally vertical reciprocation as indicated by the two headed arrow B. A die half 84 cooperates with a punch half 86 to perform the desired
25 multistage fabrication on metal strip 88 with an appropriate lifter/stock guide 90 being provided above the workpiece 88 and a lifter/stock guide 92 being provided thereunder.

Referring to Figure 5, there is shown in plan schematically the metal workpiece strip 94 and the associated support and restraining elements 96, 98, 100
30 with a microelectromechanical system device 102 shown as being embedded in the

metal. The sensor 102 may be embedded in a hole in the material 94 or otherwise secured thereto.

5 The sensors may be of nano scale, which allows them to be part of the billet of material without significantly affecting the physical or mechanical properties of the metal strip.

The microelectromechanical system device may be employed to detect temperature or position of an automated tool component or detect excessive differential velocity with respect to time and subsequently transmit digital information using an RF carrier signal to a receiver for appropriate processing. Time-dependent
10 differential velocity is proportional to acceleration and, as a result, force, and is related to the amount of resistance to kinematics or motion of the automation.

It will be noted that a preferred form of sensor is an inertial sensor which contributes to monitoring of kinematic aspects of the automated tool.

15 It will be appreciated that the hereinbefore described advantages of the invention may be achieved in this manner with sensor systems requiring wiring, not being capable of functioning in this manner.

It will be appreciated, therefore, that the present invention provides an improved means for monitoring automated tools for early and effective detection of undesired interference so that prompt action can be taken. By employing a wireless
20 system, the microelectromechanical system device may be placed for the most efficient viewing of the property being monitored. By transmitting in a wireless fashion, the processor and associated units receiving output therefrom may operate efficiently as well.

25 Whereas particular embodiments of the invention have been described herein for purposes of illustration, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that numerous variations of the details may be made without departing from the invention as described in the appended claims.